

Demosthenes

By John Haaren

In the city of Athens about twenty-five years after the Peloponnesian War there lived a delicate boy named Demosthenes. His father was a manufacturer of swords and made a great deal of money. But when Demosthenes was only seven years old his father died. Guardians had charge of his property for ten years. They robbed the boy of part of his fortune and managed the rest so badly that Demosthenes could not go to school to the best teachers in Athens because he did not have enough money to pay them.

One day, when he was sixteen years old, a great trial was going on at Athens and he strolled into the court. There were fifteen hundred and one dicasts or, as we call them, jurymen in their seats, and the court was crowded with citizens who, like Demosthenes, had gone in from curiosity. A lawyer named Callistratus was speaking. He did not finish his speech for nearly four hours. But no one left the court until he ceased to speak. Then hundreds of people went out and hurried home. Demosthenes waited to see the end. When each of the jurymen had thrown a voting pebble into a basket the clerk of the court counted the pebbles and told the result. Callistratus had won the case.

Demosthenes went home determined to become a lawyer and public speaker. In one year from that time he brought suit against his guardians, delivered four orations against them and won his case. He recovered a large part of the property which his father had left to his mother and himself.

After this he entered public life, but the first time he made a speech in the public assembly it was complete failure. He stammered and could not speak loud enough, and in trying to do so he made odd faces.

People laughed at him, and even his friends told him that he never could be a speaker, so he went home greatly cast down.

Then an actor who was a great friend of his family went to see him and encouraged him. He asked Demosthenes to read to him some passages of poetry. Then the actor recited the same passages. The verses now seemed to have new meaning and beauty. The actor pronounced the words as if he felt them. The tones

of his voice were clear and pleasant and his gestures were graceful. Demosthenes was charmed.

“You can learn to speak just as well as I do,” said the actor, “if you are willing to work patiently. Do not be discouraged, but conquer your difficulties.”

“I will,” said Demosthenes. And he did.

It is said that to improve his voice he spoke with stones in his mouth, and to become accustomed to the noise and confusion of the public assembly he went to the seashore and recited there amid the roar of the waves. To overcome his habit of lifting one shoulder above the other he suspended a sword so that the point would prick his shoulder as he raised it.

He built an underground room in which he could study without interruption and practice speaking without disturbing anyone. He had one side of his head shaved so that he would be ashamed to leave this retreat. Then he remained there for months at a time engaged in study. One thing that he did while there was to copy eight times the speeches in the famous history of Thucydides. This was to teach him to use the most fitting language. Besides all this he took lessons of an excellent speaker named Iosm'us who taught declamation.

In this way the awkward boy who had been laughed out of the assembly became in time the greatest orator of Athens. Not only was Demosthenes a graceful orator, but he was wise and patriotic. He soon gained great influence in Athens and became one of the ten official orators.

Name: _____

Demosthenes #1

How does Demosthenes' experience observing a trial at age 16 affect his life choices, as described in the passage? Use **two** details from the passage to support your response. Write your answer in complete sentences.

Name: _____

Demosthenes #2

How does Demosthenes overcome obstacles to reach his goal? Use **two** details from the passage to support your response. Write your answer in complete sentences.